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AN OUTLINE  
OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF  
MAIMONIDES

*For the Use of Teachers of Senior Classes*

by

HERBERT M. ADLER, M.A., LL.M.

Director of Jewish Education

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1935

THE JEWISH MEMORIAL COUNCIL

Woburn House, Upper Woburn Place,

LONDON, W.C.1

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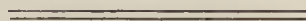
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לא תקול הדור יקדח זכרה תפארת כלל מדינת ודין  
 גמולת מטה הדב הגדול הפסח החזק הישוע לעול  
 שדרת שדרה השמור והצדק מבשרת החזק מחזק  
 נוטה קו הפליל מחלפת מחלפת הגליל המיוחדת דגל דם  
 משה המכונה תלמוד רב משי המחסר והחסדיו יציל  
 מורה ויחידו פ מועל מדיד במה גר מנה כלם מר  
 בעד לנהם חלק סמך ערמה לה יעלם במה פלח לעד ולע  
 אחוז בלבלם ובעד דלך נס ולבשר אינה לה יפעל  
 עבד ליה ולא מקום אחד מקמה פ ומעלמה ואשר קו פ  
 כח וחסד לה מן למעלה מנהם וכן צדיקים ומהם פ  
 פמיה אז למעלה יקדח טעור ולמעלה נפסה סניגטור ומה  
 יקום אחד מקמה וחזל לה צדק למעלה נהם לה מנה דסר ומה  
 יורה אדומה גמולת גמולת לה קדימותה וסכרו פולחן השמים  
 והו ישרו להם לעלה ערע לא צדקת יעשה מורה

ל גרוב

גרוב נדס יעבד נדמב כן יד מלך נדמב מר שול  
 ויבדו לו ובדד כלל עממם מר ערדקס ומה  
 ערש ערוב וכדב ועמם

The illustration on the opposite page is a photograph of a document preserved in the British Museum. We have here an actual question submitted to Maimonides, and the reply in his own handwriting. The language is mainly Arabic, written in Hebrew characters. The first two words mean "What is your opinion?" Then follow five lines of respectful address in Hebrew. The point is that a teacher has sworn to give up teaching the young daughters of a certain Jew because of a quarrel with him. He is sorry for it now. There is no one qualified to take his place, and the girls' Hebrew reading is suffering. May he continue his lessons again? An answer in Arabic is requested. Then comes the heading "The Reply." The teacher may resume if he first appears before three Jews and expresses his contrition for his rash utterance and if they absolve him. The last two words are the signature: "and Moses wrote."

## BOOKS RECOMMENDED FOR STUDY.

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*Maimonides* by Yellin and Abrahams; Jewish Historical Society of England, 1903. American edition by the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia. The English edition published by Macmillan is out of print, but the Jewish Historical Society are re-issuing it early this year at a popular price. The book is invaluable.

*The Story of the Jewish People*, Vol. II. by J. M. Myers; Kegan Paul. Chapters xviii. to xxi.

*History of the Jewish People*, Margolis and Marx. Jewish Publication Society of America, 1927. Chapters xlix., lv., lviii.

*History of the Mediæval Jews*, M. H. Harris. Bloch, New York, fifth edition, 1929. Chapters xix. and xx.

*Outlines of Jewish History*, Lady Magnus. New edition published for the Jewish Memorial Council, 1931. Chapters xx. and xxviii.

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## BOOKS FOR FURTHER REFERENCE.

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*History of the Jews* by Graetz. Vol. III, chapters vii., x., xii.-xv.

*Jewish Encyclopædia*, see under "Moses ben Maimon."

*Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by M. Friedlander. Three vols., Trübner, 1881. New edition in one vol., Routledge, 1919. The introduction includes a life of Maimonides.

*Teachings of Maimonides*, A. Cohen; Routledge, 1927.

*Jewish Literature*, Karpeles; Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913. Chapter on Maimonides.

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# MAIMONIDES.

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## *Introductory.*

Maimonides was born on the 14th of Nisan (*Erev Pesach*), corresponding with the 30th March, 1135 C.E. This year will therefore mark the 800th anniversary of his birth. The occasion should be commemorated by all Jewish schools and classes. In most cases it will be convenient to celebrate the secular date. As March 30th falls on a Sabbath, the following Sunday can be chosen. By way of preparation, the lessons given to senior pupils in Jewish history should for some weeks in advance be centred round Maimonides.

On the day arranged the children should be assembled. A brief address should be given to them, explaining the significance of the occasion. A scene may be enacted representing, for instance, a day in the sage's life: his return from his daily visit to the Court at Cairo: his consultation hour, at which many of his patients are poor and humble people: his reception of learned men who come to him for advice: the arrival of letters from distant Jewish communities seeking his guidance: and finally his settling down to the continuance of one of his great works. One or two of the elder pupils may contribute items of their own which they have prepared, on a topic such as their conception of the grounds on which Maimonides deserves to be considered one of our greatest men. The proceedings can fittingly be concluded by the singing of *Yigdal*.

## *Parentage and Name.*

Moses Maimonides was born in Cordova. His father, Maimon, was a *dayan* and was descended from a line of *dayanim* and scholars. Maimon was a deeply learned man; besides writing a number of works on Jewish subjects,

he was a keen student of science and mathematics. He devoted himself ardently to the instruction of his son Moses. He had a younger son, David, as well, in whose education Moses assisted, and also a daughter. Moses never called himself Maimonides. This is an artificial name coined centuries later on the analogy of Greek names like Atrides, which denotes son of Atreus. He referred to himself as Moses son of Maimon, sometimes adding "hasephardi," the Spaniard. Fame shortens names. He became known as "Maimuni" or, by his initials, as רמב"ם.

### *The Jews in Spain.*

Cordova was the capital—"the bride" she was lovingly called—of Andalusia, or Moorish Spain. It spanned the broad river Guadalquivir. Though when Maimonides was born it had already passed from the zenith of its fame, it was still a beautiful city of palaces and gardens. The lovely mosque was still standing which the Moors had erected in the eighth century. It is still an object of admiration at the present day. Under the rule of the Christian Visigoths the lot of the Jews had been hard and humiliating. But a new epoch opened for them with the Moorish conquest of the peninsula, which was secured by the battle of Xeres in 711. Within five years the whole of Spain, except for a mere corner in the North, had been wrested from the Visigoths. It was a corner, however, which grew steadily in extent in the succeeding centuries, till in the time of Maimonides, a substantial part of it was again in Christian hands. The Jews from the first welcomed the invading Moors and quickly gained their confidence. On their side, the Moslems were tolerant to them, and their rulers often showed them conspicuous favour. The Jews rapidly adopted Arabic as their secular language. Its kinship to Hebrew made the transition easy and complete. In Arabic they learnt to express themselves far more gracefully and accurately than was possible in the corrupt jargon which they had been

employing. Largely through the providential arrival of Moses ben Enoch in Cordova in the tenth century, the centre of gravity of Jewish learning and authority shifted to Spain from the Babylonian academies of Sura and Pumbeditha, where the Gaonate was fast crumbling away. A golden epoch dawned for Hebrew and Jewish learning. It produced renowned statesmen like Chasdai ibn Shaprut and Samuel Hanagid, both of them men of letters and ardent patrons of Jewish writers: grammarians like Dunash ibn Labrat: poets like Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021 to 1069), Moses ibn Ezra (1070 to 1139) and Jehudah Halevi (1086 to 1140), who had still a few years to live when Maimonides was born.

The opening of the twelfth century ushered in a period of disquiet and insecurity. To assist them in their peril from the aggressions of the Christian kingdoms, the Moors of Spain had called in the Almoravids, a Berber tribe in North Africa. They were a barbarous race, only recently converted to Islam, but they had great fighting qualities, and they had established a vast dominion in Africa. They came to Spain to help their allies, but they ended by subjugating them. They had no love for the arts and graces, but as a whole they treated the Jews with toleration. It was under Ali, the second Almoravid prince, that Maimonides was born. Ali had accorded the Jews some privileges, and they must have looked forward with confidence to the future. Their hopes were ill-founded.

### *The Almohades.*

A fresh storm was gathering in the Western Moslem world. A fanatic named Ibn Tumart had gathered round him a sect who were obsessed by a narrow and intolerant unitarianism which revolted from the traditional interpretation of the Koran, especially as regards the qualities that could be attributed to the Deity. They called themselves the Almohades, the Proclaimers of the Unity. They prescribed a life of rugged austerity and they were intolerant of all

refinement. Entering upon a grim holy war, they soon made themselves masters of the whole of North West Africa. There they set themselves to exterminate every religion other than their own. From Africa they crossed to Spain, and in 1148 they conquered Andalusia, almost at a blow. Cordova fell into their hands. For Jews, and for Christians too, it was a time of calamity. Synagogues were destroyed, and houses of learning were closed. Conversion, exile or death were the only alternatives offered now, just as they were by Ferdinand and Isabella three hundred and fifty years later. Flight was not always possible. With death staring them in the face, not a few Jews pronounced the formula that was required of them: a belief in the one God and the acceptance of Mohamed as his prophet, and they constrained themselves from time to time to attend the mosques. But in the privacy of their homes they continued to observe the practices of their religion, now doubly endeared to them by persecution. Some brave spirits, both in Spain and in Morocco, could not bring themselves to adopt such a double life and chose to sanctify the Name by making the supreme sacrifice.

### *A Wanderer in Spain.*

Most of the Cordovan Jews, Maimon and his family amongst them, went into exile. Moses had just attained the age of *barmitsvah*. The family moved first to a town under a Christian king, but within three years that city too had fallen before the Almohades, and the fugitives had again to find a new home. From place to place they flitted, till after twelve years of wandering they left Spain altogether.

These years were far from being an interval of indolence or despair for the young Moses. He seized the opportunity of attending lectures from Arabic savants in philosophy and science, and he pursued his Talmudical studies with colossal industry. One would imagine that the scarcity of books must have been a severe handicap, for in this nomad life Maimon cannot have carried many volumes

with him. But Moses was gifted with a phenomenal memory, unique in its range and accuracy, and the force of necessity sharpened this native talent. Whilst still in Spain, he composed a book on the Calendar and another on Logic. He wrote a commentary on several tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, and he embarked on the first of his famous works the "Commentary on the Mishnah."

*At Fes.*

In 1160 the family took refuge in Fez in Morocco. Maimon may have had some reason to hope that life would be more tolerable there than it had been in Spain. But here too the Almohades bore sway and suffered no religion other than their own to raise its head. Like many others, Maimon and his sons must have had to conceal their faith, and to go about as Moslems. Such a disguise was feasible in a country where they were not known. In Cordova it would have been impossible. One can be certain that a life of pretence must have been galling and repellent to them, but they had no option. As it was, they were in dire peril from informers.

The men of the household set up a business in precious stones. Apparently Maimon and David were the more active members. Maimonides was deep in his Jewish studies and was exploring the fields of philosophy and science. Soon after his arrival in Fez, Maimon wrote his "Letter of Consolation," in which he appealed to his fellow-Jews not to lose heart, but to keep steadfast to their faith. If they could not maintain all the observances of their religion, they should keep all that they could. They should cling fast to prayer, if necessary abbreviating their devotions, or even uttering them in Arabic. These days of tribulation would certainly pass away.

*The Letter on Apostacy.*

Fired no doubt by his father's example, Moses now came to the front in the same worthy cause. Some unknown

rabbi from abroad had been appealed to by a Jew in Morocco for his opinion on the conduct of those Jews who were rendering pretended allegiance to Islam. This self-righteous authority had declared that if a Jew had uttered the formula of Mohamedan belief, he could no longer be considered a Jew. He went to the length of declaring that if a Jew attended a mosque, even without performing any act of worship there, and then went home and said his devotions, his prayer was an offence and doubled his sin. In his **אִנְקָרַת הַשְּׁמֵר** (Letter on Apostacy), called also **מֵאַמֵּר קִדּוּשׁ הַשֵּׁם** (Essay on Martyrdom), Maimonides takes the rabbi severely to task for this ill-considered utterance. He emphasises the all-important difference between a voluntary act and a submission under compulsion. If, he points out, the many pseudo-converts are told that they may not pray, they will give up every other observance of Judaism as well. He grants that if any acceptance of idolatry had been involved, the condemnation would have been justified. But this is not so. Even the recital of the formula deceives nobody. Moreover, it is still open to a Jew to practise his religion secretly. Of course it would be a noble act to choose martyrdom rather than to escape by a subterfuge, but to commend such heroism is quite different from enjoining it as a duty. Maimonides tells his fellow-Jews that, even if they have to bow before the present necessity, they need not consider that they have put themselves outside the pale. But he urges them to resolve at any cost to escape to a freer land at the first opportunity, even if it means separation from their families. In this they should follow the example of the patriarch Abraham. He warns them against hoping against hope for the coming of a Messiah to release them from their difficulties.

### *Escape.*

The letter had a profound effect. It succeeded in infusing new courage into the hearts of the waverers. But it resulted also in making Maimonides and his father marked

men in the eyes of the Moslem authorities. They were in imminent peril when, in 1165, they took ship for Palestine. They reached Acre after a terrible storm. After a few months there, they visited Jerusalem and Hebron. Palestine, however, offered no prospects. The first two Crusades had put the country under the domination of the Christians. The Jewish population left was an insignificant remnant. Maimon and his household decided to emigrate to Egypt, and in the same year they settled in Fostat, or old Cairo.

*In Fostat.*

There was a big Jewish population in Egypt, including a large number of Karaites. The Jews had their own Nagid, who occupied something of the position of an Exilarch. Under the Fatimid Khalifs their lot was not unhappy. It improved considerably later on under the great Saladin. He was appointed Vizir in 1167 and made himself Khalif four years later. In the years that followed he extended his sway to Syria and Palestine, and even further East. Wherever his authority was established the Jews were certain of freedom and justice.

Soon after his arrival in Egypt Moses sustained a double loss. His father died, and his dearly-loved brother David was drowned in the Indian Ocean. With him was lost the family's stock-in-trade of jewels. Moses had to seek a new means of livelihood. He set his face resolutely against deriving any income from his work for the Community. He turned to medicine and soon won a reputation as a physician. His profession, however, still left him time for the prosecution of his literary work.

*The Commentary on the Mishnah.*

In 1168 Maimonides gave to the world his first "magnum opus," his Commentary on the Mishnah, to which he had devoted himself ever since his early years in Spain. He wrote it in Arabic and called it the *Siraj* or "Light." Like his other Arabic works, it was afterwards translated into

Hebrew. His object was to make the Mishnah so clear that a student could master it systematically without having recourse to the vast tomes of the Talmud. Conflicting opinions on *halachah* are often given in the Mishnah, and Maimonides, after sifting the Talmud, pronounces which of them are to be accepted as authoritative. He used to the full his sense of system and his unrivalled power of co-ordination. Such gifts were needed, since the traditions and regulations concerning any matter are not all contained in the particular tractate of the Mishnah where one might expect to find them. The practical value of the work was at once recognized, and its reputation has endured to the present day. The worth of the Commentary was enhanced by the introductory chapters prefixed to the various sections. The most famous of these are the general introduction to *Zeraim*, the excursus to the tenth chapter of *Sanhedrin*, known as *Chelek* (the portion in the World to come), and the eight chapters prefixed to the Ethics of the Fathers.

### *The Creeds.*

In the Preface to *Chelek* Maimonides sets forth his conception of the nature of future existence and the way in which the soul of man can be perfected to attain it. This leads him to a digression which had a profound effect on the development of Judaism. He considers it opportune to formulate the fundamental principles of belief taught by the Torah, and this he does in thirteen articles. These Creeds he regarded as crucial, and as forming a test of belief. Though some criticism was levelled, both then and since, against the notion of crystallizing dogma in this fashion, the Creeds have commanded overwhelming assent. In a condensed Hebrew form they have found their way into the Prayer-book. Metrical versions abounded. The most famous is *Yigdal*, which was composed by Dayan Daniel ben Judah in 1404.

### *The Eight Chapters.*

The Eight Chapters are a disquisition on the whole

subject of Ethics, which Maimonides defines as a medicine for the soul and its faculties. The soul, just like the body, may be healthy or sick. It may suffer from maladies which call for treatment if they are not to grow worse. The causes of moral defects are examined in detail. In his fourth chapter Maimonides incorporates bodily Aristotle's well-known theory that perfection is a mean between two extremes. Thus courage is the virtue that lies between the two extremes of recklessness on the one hand and of cowardice on the other. Humility is the mean between haughtiness and servility. The truly moral man will avoid any extreme. He will constantly examine his actions and will check any tendency to extremes which he discovers in his character. Man is gifted with complete free-will. God intended him to be as much master of his will as of his muscles. It is true that the physical constitution with which he is born may incline him to some virtue or some imperfection, but he is his own master, and he can in time mould his nature by the conduct he prescribes for himself. Maimonides ridicules the theory of astrologers that the planets under which a person is born decide his nature and even his future.

### *The Letter to Yemen.*

His Commentary on the Mishnah placed Maimonides in the forefront of scholars. His world-wide reputation is evidenced by the fact that four years later a community as remote as that of Yemen in Arabia turned to him in the hour of its perplexity. The position of the Jews there was parlous. The local Mahdi was forcing many of them to accept the religion of Mohamed under the threat of dire penalties. The Jews as a whole were very ignorant and, coming under the influence of Moslems, some of them began to waver in their belief and to wonder whether there might not be some truth in the predominating faith and whether it might not be the fact that some words of Holy Writ actually portended the coming of Mohamed. Others were

lending an ear to the pretensions of a false Messiah. In this hour of danger, the learned head of the Community, Jacob Alfayumi, turned to the sage of Egypt for encouragement and direction. The reply of Maimonides is known as *אֶנְרֵת הַיָּם* (Letter to the South) and also as *פֶּתַח הַתְּקוּהָה* (the Door of Hope). He sometimes addresses his correspondent and sometimes his brethren collectively. There has never been an age, he shows, when Jews have not had to submit to the enmity of other nations, engendered by suspicion and jealousy. All attempts to uproot Israel's faith, whether by persecution or persuasion or by a pretended higher revelation, have failed in the past and will fail again. The new religions are but spurious and specious imitations of the old. They will never prevail. The present calamity is but a test of the people's loyalty. The sacrifice of worldly goods, and even of home, is in reality an offering laid on God's altar. God will surely requite it in this world and the next.

Maimonides asks that the letter shall be copied and circulated in the various Congregations and read publicly. He urges, however, that it should be kept secret from the Moslems. He has run a great risk in writing it, but it is worth while. We learn that the letter was extraordinarily successful. Drooping spirits were revived, and a new air of determination asserted itself.

#### *Later Years. Character.*

Life for Maimonides became busier, but happier and more tranquil. He was appointed to the honoured position of Nagid. We learn that he set up an ecclesiastical Board of ten, with himself at its head. In 1186 he became Court physician to Alfadhel, Saladin's vizir in Egypt, and this secured for him a settled income. It is recorded even that the Frankish king (probably Richard I of England) proposed to make him his body-physician, an offer which Maimonides declined. As a religious authority he was consulted by East and West. How he spent his busy days and his Sabbaths

he describes in graphic terms in a letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, one of his translators. His advancing years were sweetened by the birth of a son, Abraham, who was destined to succeed him as Nagid, and by the devotion of his favourite pupil, Joseph Aknin, who left Fez for Egypt to be near the master on whom he had set his heart. Aknin proved a zealous champion of his teacher when his opinions were attacked, and at times Maimonides had even to restrain his impetuosity.

Such a man as Maimonides could not fail to have enthusiastic admirers. He had a character of singular perfection. He cared for truth above everything and sought it with the full strength of his undazzled intellect. Yet he was amazingly tolerant. He could, it is true, express himself trenchantly in the face of arrogance and bluster, but he never troubled about his dignity. He was grateful for sensible criticism. Shallow, vindictive carping he generally preferred to leave unanswered. He loved peace and pursued it. He was gifted with a sane, well-balanced outlook which enabled him to proffer golden words of advice in the world's affairs. Though his mind was like a library, he had nothing of the pedant about him. Through all his writings there breathes a deep spirituality. Religion to him with all its observances, is a force to purify and perfect human life. There is no jot of it that cannot serve this high purpose. And as he taught, so he lived.

### *The Yad.*

In about 1180, after ten years' assiduous work, Maimonides produced his monumental code or digest of Jewish law, which he called *משנה תורה* or Recapitulation of the Law. Curiously enough this was the same title as that traditionally given to the fifth book of the Pentateuch. "Deuteronomy" is only the Greek translation for *משנה תורה*. We must not confuse Maimonides's *משנה תורה* with his Commentary on the Mishnah, though the titles may seem con-

fusing. The work was also known under the name of "the Strong Hand" ( **יָד הַחֲזָקָה** ), an appropriate title because it occurs in the Bible in connection with the great Moses, and because the numerical value of **יד** is 14, the number of sections into which the work is divided. Unlike the Commentary on the Mishnah and the Guide to the Perplexed, which came later, it was written in Hebrew. The language is neither the classical Hebrew of the Bible nor the Aramaic of the Gemara, but the later Hebrew of the Mishnah. It was a far wider work than the Commentary on the Mishnah, and it took account not only of the Talmud in both its versions, but of the Midrash and of the decisions of the Geonim. It embraced the whole of Jewish life, ethical as well as ceremonial, and dealt with the past as well as the present. It was arranged on a logical and comprehensive plan of the author's own invention. All arguments and discussions are eliminated, and only the practical result is extracted. As Maimonides himself says in his introduction, his object is to enable any man to ascertain the Jewish law on any point, without reference to any other book than the Bible. In advance of the main work, he issued in Arabic a preliminary framework, the **סֵפֶר הַמִּצְוֹת**, in which he enumerated and explained all the commandments.

The Code itself was a masterpiece. It crystallized the whole of Jewish law into a compendious, readily accessible form. It jettisoned decisions that on the weight of authority could not be regarded as authoritative or permanent. Throughout it dwells on the spiritual side of Judaism and shows how the ritual commandments serve that purpose.

The first of the fourteen sections is the famous "Book of Knowledge," **סֵפֶר הַמַּדָּע**. It opens with the fundamental duty of recognizing God as the author of all Creation. We are enjoined to love Him and to fear Him. The more we contemplate the wonderful World which He has fashioned, and the more we discern how His wisdom permeates it all, the more we shall be drawn to Him, till we

can exclaim with the Psalmist: "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God." In his "Book of Knowledge" Maimonides incorporates many ideas taken from Greek philosophy. He even includes the current conception of the structure of the Universe. He gives rules, which as a doctor he was well qualified to do, for the proper care of the body. His advice strikes one as singularly modern. Doctors and medicines are to be the last resort. It is far better to avoid them by leading a temperate, well-regulated life. He urges the value of exercise, of well-timed rest and of bathing. Another portion of this section is devoted to the duty of studying the Torah. Yet another is allotted to Repentance. One can see that the subject is dear to his heart. He sets out in a simple, readable form the real essentials of reconciliation with God and man, and he illustrates his teaching by many of the pearls of Rabbinic lore. Nowhere could one find a loftier conception of the Jewish ideal of תשובה.

In the final chapter of the *Yad*, Maimonides dwells on the nature of the Messianic age foreshadowed by the Prophets. He discourages rumination on the legendary embellishments of what must essentially remain a mystery locked up in the future. The Messiah himself will be a king of the line of David, under whose perfect rule the dispersed of Israel will be gathered in, and under whom the Temple will be rebuilt. We are not to imagine that he will perform wonders and miracles or that the laws of Nature will be upset. But in that distant time, the arrival of which we are bidden not to attempt to compute, mankind will be reformed and all humanity will have learnt to worship the true and only God. "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

### *Reception of the Yad.*

Throughout world-wide Jewry the *Yad* was received with acclamation, and copies were eagerly made. Some critics there were. Maimonides was blamed for not citing

his authorities, though his great objects of brevity and simplicity would have suffered if he had done so. He was accused of laying down the law. He was criticised for writing in Hebrew instead of in the language of the Talmud. Objection was taken to his novel classification, which completely threw over the order of the Mishnah. His most powerful and most single-minded critic was Abraham ben David of Posquières in the South of France. He is known from his initials as the "Rabad," and his notes (*hassagoth*) are still to be found in the margin of editions of the *Yad*. Maimonides himself recognized later the force of the contention that his work was incomplete without a citation of authorities, and he hoped to be able to supply the deficiency in his life-time. He never found time to do so, but long afterwards R. Joseph Caro, the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, filled the gap by his Commentary *בְּרֵךְ מִשְׁנָה*.

The *Yad* took permanent root, and the fear was not borne out that it would result in the neglect of the Talmud. It has not even become the final practical code that Maimonides hoped it would be. It was built over later by other codes, notably by the *Shulchan Aruch*, but these would never have been possible without the foundation which the *Yad* supplied.

### *The Guide to the Perplexed.*

In 1190, ten years after the publication of the *Yad*, Maimonides gave to the world his third masterpiece, the *Guide to the Perplexed* ( *מֹדֵרָה נְבוֹכִים* ). It was intended for thinking men whose studies had brought them into collision with religion. He wrote it, he says, for his favourite pupil Aknin, and for others like him, men of sound knowledge who have studied philosophy and who, though religious at heart, are "perplexed and bewildered by the ambiguous terms and figurative expressions in the Bible," which they cannot reconcile with the truths impressed upon them by their general reading. His broad aim was to

harmonize Judaism and the Bible with Reason, which to him meant Greek philosophy. To us at the present day, ancient philosophy may not seem a matter of great importance, but we must remember that at that time the teachings of the Greek thinkers commanded an enormous prestige. As Dr. A. Cohen has pointed out, the first contact with their writings produced something of the shock which the religious world experienced in the middle of the last century when Darwin's theory of evolution startled the world. The inevitable question arose: which was true, Judaism or the philosophy of the Greeks? Some Jewish thinkers like Jehudah Halevi answered by unhesitatingly rejecting the latter, but others, Maimonides amongst the foremost, sought to reconcile the two and to show that they were not incompatible with one another. Yet Maimonides was not a slavish follower of the Greeks. For instance, he rejects Aristotle's doctrine of the eternity of matter, or in other words, the idea that the World never had a beginning.

The *Guide* explains many difficult terms in Scripture, particularly such as seem to speak of God in almost human terms. For instance, when we are told that Man was created in the image of God, Maimonides declares that this refers to the divine intellect with which he is endowed. When it is said that God rested on the seventh day, it means no more than that he desisted from creation. Maimonides accepts the possibility of miracles, but at the same time thinks that many supernatural occurrences in the Bible are to be explained figuratively, or else as visions. In this latter light he interprets Jacob's wrestling with the angel and the incident of Balaam's ass. The existence of angels he views in a philosophical light. He sees them as the Intelligences or natural forces of the Universe. All the laws of the Torah are given to us for our own good. He instances the dietary laws, which make for health. Sacrifices, he boldly asserts, were ordained not because they were a good thing in themselves, but because they were the natural form of worship in

those days, and because it is impossible for men to be suddenly weaned from everything to which they have been accustomed. But prayer is on a higher level, for it is a direct approach to God.

The book deals with many fundamental problems; for instance, the origin and existence of Evil. In the belief of Maimonides, the World is essentially good. Evil is simply the absence of Good, just as we may say that darkness is the absence of light, or that blindness is the absence of sight. It is not a power of itself. Most of our troubles are caused by our own imperfections, and to that extent the evil is there so that we may overcome it. Maimonides also discusses the nature of prophecy. Is a prophet super-human, or is he a man as other men, but endowed by God with specially developed faculties of insight and intellect? He inclines to the latter view. All through, his attitude is that Judaism is not a blind faith, but that it must rest on genuine belief. It must satisfy man's reasoning power.

The *Guide* was welcomed enthusiastically by a very wide circle. It was rendered later into Hebrew by Samuel ibn Tibbon, and Maimonides lived just long enough to see the translation appear. But there were opponents too, who objected to its modernist views, its free interpretation of the Bible and its admixture of Greek philosophy. Some of its opinions they branded as heretical. Fierce controversy was aroused, and it raged not only round the *Guide*, but about others also of Maimonides's works. For many years after his death, there were rival camps of Maimonists and anti-Maimonists. Some of his books were even publicly burnt. But posterity has vindicated the lasting value of the *Guide* as an outspoken attempt to unite Faith with Reason. And this value abides even though some of the problems in the book have ceased to agitate us. Moreover the spiritual insight which the work gives into our religion is a legacy that cannot perish. Its influence has not been confined to Jews.

It had a far-reaching effect also on Christian and Mohamedan philosophers and divines.

### *Correspondence.*

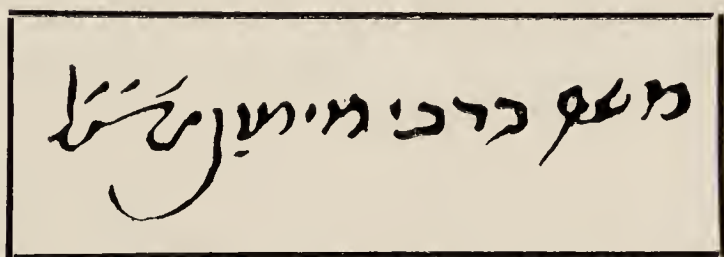
The unique position of Maimonides brought him endless requests for guidance in religious matters from every quarter. The *Yad* alone evoked a whole river of enquiries with which he dealt assiduously. His תשובות ("responsa" or replies) were often carefully treasured and copied. Some, like the specimen shown in this booklet, have been preserved in their original form to the present day. They are written in a level, scholarly handwriting, for he never employed a secretary. In one reply we find him deploring the lack of decorum in the Synagogue during the repetition of the *Amidah* on Sabbaths and Festivals. In the circumstances he considers it better that it should only be recited once. On another occasion he disapproves of interrupting the continuity of the *Amidah* by the insertion of poetical compositions or *piyutim*. But here popular feeling has prevailed against him. Often one obtains an interesting light on his character. One can see how tolerant and broad-minded he was. He declares, for instance, that a Jew may feel at liberty to teach the commandments to Christians, since they have incorporated the whole of the Torah in their Scriptures and acknowledge it as divine, even though they put wrong interpretations upon some passages. He gives his opinion as to the manner in which the Karaite sectaries are to be treated. It must be remembered that he was one of the protagonists in his day in the battle against this harmful secession. Nevertheless he does not believe in adopting harshness to its adherents. So long as they do not speak disrespectfully of the authorities of Rabbinic Judaism, they are to be met peaceably and courteously. They may be assisted in the circumcision of their sons, comfort is to be extended to them in their bereavements, and the last token of respect is to be shown to their dead.

A Moslem proselyte to Judaism called Obadiah asks him whether he is entitled to use such expressions as "Our God and the God of our Fathers," or "Who has chosen us" in his prayers. Maimonides emphatically declares that he may, for he is in a real sense a son of Abraham our father. "Since you have entered under the wings of the Shechinah, there is no difference between you and us. Do not be concerned about your pedigree. If we trace our ancestry to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your true Father is He who spake and the World existed." In another letter to the same proselyte, whose feelings have been wounded by an ill-considered remark of his Jewish teacher to the effect that Mohamedans are idolaters, Maimonides indignantly denies this. Because Judaism has been libelled by Islam, that is no reason why it should retort with another false accusation. Whatever defects there may be in the religion of Mohamed, it is at least purely monotheistic. The mere fact that some of its devotional acts have a pagan origin is beside the point. A religion must not be judged by the associations of the distant past. More than once these two letters recall the Book of Ruth in their tenderness for the stranger and in their sublime conception of the universal fatherhood of God.

### *The End of his Life.*

Maimonides's life continued full and fruitful to the end, but his incessant labours took toll of his strength, and we find him complaining of growing debility. He died in December 1204, in his seventieth year. He was buried in Tiberias in the Holy Land. In Jerusalem a public fast day was ordained. In Fostat itself a three days' mourning was proclaimed, in which the Moslems participated. From far and near Congregations lamented the passing of this great leader of Israel. He left a worthy son to follow in his footsteps. To his people he bequeathed a treasure that time cannot dim: the masterly products of his great mind and the memory of a character blended of courage, humility and

service. The homage due to him has enshrined itself in the saying: "From Moses to Moses there arose none like Moses."



Autograph of Maimonides.





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*Superior Printers Ltd. (T.U.), 11 & 13 New Road, E.1*

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